Whose World Is It?
Genesis 1:24 - 2:4
November 21, 1971

When the history of the 20th century is written some time in the future, thoughtful chroniclers are going to observe that you and I lived in a time when man, in general, stopped believing that it mattered whether or not there was a God. Some of these chroniclers will do their research carefully enough to discover that in the late 60's and early 70's a minor flurry was created in religious circles by a few men who announced that God was dead. It will be observed by those careful historians that the announcement never really amounted to much: but it will be observed by all historians that it was an age which, for all practical purposes adopted a world view that eliminated God altogether. People, of course, went right on affirming their belief in the existence of a supreme being: but the evidence will show, I will predict, that the existence of God had very little to do with the way men behaved.

Dr. Louis Patrick puts it this way: "One of the apprent illusions that our age has dispelled is just this! :'The earth is the Lord's' Now, even Eskimos file real estate claims with mineral rights included."

The twentieth century was the time when men stopped believing that God, if he existed at all, had anything to do with his creation - with human life. It was the time when men seized sole ownership of the earth - for good or for ill.

And then we come to Thanksgiving: the annual harvest festival in our culture: an we have a rather monumental theological problem, namely, who are we going to thank and why? Our dilemma is reflected in the story of the man who was tilling the rows in his garden, when a pious soul made the passing remark: "I see that God has blessed you in your labors." The perspiring gardener replied, "You should have seen this garden when God had it by himself!"

That's our problem. We have seen man, in our own age, learn how to do for himself those things that were once attributed to God. The fertility of the soil is not so much a product of God's grace as the quality of chemical fertilizer. The fact of good health is not so much a miracle of God's beneficence as man's medical technology. Or so it seems.

In any case, what will be the content of your Thanksgiving prayer? - as you sit down to a table laden with food you purchased with your money which you earned with your own sweat and effort: food produced on a mechanized farm, run by computer: food harvested, cleaned, packaged and marketed by a whole collage of people. Let me share with you the content of my prayer - which I would guess is not too different from yours. I will thank God - because I am grateful - for the food that day, and all the food it represents. I will thank God for the home in which I live, for the health of my family, for the fantastic array of goods and devices we have at our disposal. I will thank him for my freedom, for my friends and for my loved ones. Most Thanksgiving Day prayers will go like that, and the idea I want to communicate this morning is that by praying that prayer; by thanking God for these things and conditions and relationships, we are making a profound theological affirmation, an affirmation that flies squarely in the face of the predominant agnosticism of our time. Consciously or unconsciously, we are affirming, in the act of thanking him, that God has had a great deal to do with our lives and with the world. We are reaffirming our belief in an old, old, idea - the providence of God: the idea that behind all the intermediate providers, God is the giver of every good and perfect gift: an idea summarized beautifully in a little song my children taught me:

Back of the flour is the mill: and back of the mill is the grain:
And back of the grain is the wind and the rain:
And the father's will.

It was the winter of 1621 when William Bradford wrote in his diary, "Behold, now another providence of God. A ship comes into the harbor." Now William Bradford knew, as we know, that the ship came into the harbor because its timbers were sturdy enough to withstand the North Atlantic, and because the winds had been right, and because the captain knew how to work a sextant. Yet he called it a providence of God, and in doing so was making the same affirmation which we make when we thank the Lord for frozen turkeys and pre-fab houses.

It is an affirmation that goes deeply to the heart of the Biblical tradition. I read this morning from the first and second chapters of the Book of Genesis.

The story of creation perplexes and bothers us with its apparent detailed description of what happened and when. But the tremendous significance of the passage is in what it says about God the Creator, God's relationship to his kcreation, and man's role within God's creation.

It says, first, that things did not just happen as a result of a cosmic accident, but that there is an intentionality in the universe, a will, a creative force that brought order out of chaos, that made something out of nothing. It says, second, that the plan of the creator can be seen in what he created. There are seeds and plants and food. And in this we see that the creator has a definite continuing relationship with his creation. What he gave once, he continues to give. It says, third, that man is something special. God says to man: ". . fill the earth and subdue it, rule over it, use it, life off of it. . " God does not say to man, "It is now yours to do with what you want." Rather the sense of the Biblical creation story is that God is very much the owner: and man is very much the manager - the trustee - the steward. Man's place in God's creation is one of responsibility. And from that series of Biblical affirmations we believe in Providence. It is still his creation: he is still creating it: we are partners in the process: we are managers of the property: but it belongs to him: we are responsible to him and accountable to him for our trusteeship. And it is to him - the owner - that we owe gratitude.

The creation story, as you know, moves rather quickly to the fall of man. Man simply refuses to live by the rules. Instead of manager, man wants to be owner. Instead of trustee, man wants to be the boss. So the rules get broken, symbolically by Adam and Eve and the tree of life, but historically, time and time again as men showed their indifference to the created order and their disdain for the owner.

That's where we are ecologically. We act as if we own the place and that we can jolly well do with it whatever we please. Instead of playing our given role in the order of things as those who are responsible, we act as if it's all here to exploit and rape to satisfy every whimsical need we feel. At heart the ecological disaster we have made for ourselves is a theological problem: a self made problem resulting from our indifference to the will of the owner. That goes for oil slicks, and air pollution, and chemical waste in the Wabash River. It applies to schemes to melt the Arctic ice cap and run pipe lines through the tundra. But it also applies to those who write "beat I. U." with spray paint on giant rocks, and those who use Greenbush road as a garbage dump. It's really a theological issue when we use a power mower to trim a twenty by twenty patch of grass, or when we jump in a 2,000 lb. machine to transport us one block. It's a theological issue, relating to man's role in creating when we find ourselves caught in technological overkill. It has been calculated that the number of calories consumed in the form of oil, gas and coal to furnish farm machinery, transportation, pesticides, fertilizer to produce a unit of food exceeds the calories contined in the food itself.

Now I don't know what you do with that kind of fact except worry about it, and hope that our technology will be able to extricate us from the mess it has gotten us into. But I do know that if God is the owner, it is every bit as offensive and wrong to dump your car ashtray along a country road as it is to dump it on my living room carpet.

If the earth is the Lord's, as the Psalmist suggests: if God is the owner - as Genesis suggests, there are some particular implications - some of them attitudinal; some of them behavioral.

Dr. Ernest Campbell suggests that "To hold the belief that the earth is

the Lord's is to approach the bountiful provisions of life with the humility of a guest rather than the arrogance of a proprietor." We have much to learn here from the American Indians, who never heard of Genesis, but who did, for centuries, realise a certain modesty in relation to nature. When travelling, some Indian tribes made a practice of moving so carefully that as far as possible they left no evidence of their having passed that way. Now, it isn't realistic for modern man ever to contemplate emulating that. But it is realistic to question the latest in military technology since the ban on chemical defoliants. Two botanists, in a recent paper, report that in Viet Nam, every day from dawn till dark, 150 huge bulldozersplows are making vast wastelands of wooded and cultivated areas - following which only elephant grass will grow. What do you suppose the owner thinks about that? The creator-owner, that is.

If the earth is the Lord's, and if we are His guests, there are some implications about our attitudes and our behavior. We need a healthy dose of modesty and humility. We need what can only be called reverence for the created order and for all life. We need, most of all, to reorient our thinking about our own small role in the scheme of things - and our ownership of property, goods - life itself. For if the earth is the Lord's - it is all a gift.

Jesus talked about ownership in a memorable section of the Sermon on the Mount. "Put away anxious thoughts about food and drink and clothes. . Life is more than these. . . Consider the birds - the lilies. . . set your mind on God's Kingdom." Jesus knew that one of man's major problems in God's economy was ownership. He knew - as Genesis tells it - that man wants to be the owner, and that the urge to acquire and have and own would forever be a barrier in the way of a right relationship with God. That passage, by the way, has always been subject to some bad interpretation. He did not say - don't give any thought to providing for yourselves. He did not teach irresponsibility. He did say

"Don't be anxious"; don't get involved in a debilitating, selfish anxiety about your need to accumulate.

I think that is most relevant as we approach Thanksgiving: because the Gospel of middle America is precisely that there is salvation in owning and accumulating. It is preached every evening on television. There are cosmetics to make you irresistable, tooth paste to make you sexy, shirts to give you confidence, deodorants to give you security. If you want to play in the big leagues there are cars to give you self esteem, cigars that exude power and computers to make you - if not immortal, at least remembered by your customers. And if you need love - you can buy that too, by providing cough medicine to your husband, Geritol to your wife, or protein packed burgers to your dog. Modern American Middle Class man, observed Wm. Sloane Coffin, has become a "Hamlet in a Supermarket: to buy or not to buy: that is the question."

Well, Jesus suggested that there is more to life than that: that in the Providence of God we were created for a purpose - and that purpose is something more than satisfying every need the ad agencies create. Jesus suggested that a right relationship with God - the God who owns the earth - is where we will find meaning and salvation.

Authentic, heart-felt gratitude, it seems to me - must have some basis in something other than the goods and materials we have managed to buy. It must penetrate our accumulated goods - all the way back to the Providence of God who gives us life itself, and in whose world we are privileged to live.

So we come to Thanksgiving, and our need to express gratitude to our creator God. In a sense it is a cultural holiday. The Pilgrims started it and Abraham Lincoln first made it a National Celebration - neither one of which had much to

be grateful for according to our standards. But both possessed a deep sense that God's providence had played a role in their story: that he was responsible for their being alive: and that he was very much involved in their world.

As we give thanks this year, let's remember them - : let's begin at the point of God's ownership and our role as his guests: let's reflect on the ancient truth that he is the giver of everything we have.

A sermon, of course, cannot make you feel grateful. I can insist that my children say "thank you" but not that they feel gratitude. I have tried to provide some theological reflections to undergird your Thanksgiving - but in a very real sense - you will conclude this sermon yourselves - this Thursday.

"The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those that dwell therein.

For it was he who founded it upon the seas and planted it firm upon the waters beneath."

Amen.